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DEPARTMENT FOR M, DS, CA/ACS, EB, NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [CASC](#) [ABLD](#) [ASEC](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: SYRIAN MFA FOLLOW UP ON FELTMAN-SHAPIRO DISCUSSIONS

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Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1. \(C\) Summary:](#) In a March 17 meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs' Chef du Cabinet Bassam Sabagh to follow up on Acting NEA A/S Feltman and NSC/NENA Senior Director Shapiro's March 7 session with FM Muallim, Charge reviewed pending U.S. official visa requests, briefly discussed the Murad child abduction case, briefed on upcoming U.S. visits, reviewed the Embassy's offer to discuss MFA questions about pending export license issues, and raised the need for deciding on whether the Embassy may reopen the American Language Center (ALC) prior to May 1. Sabagh promised to forward the U.S. non-paper to FM Muallim after it had been translated. He reported that, as of roughly a week ago, the MFA had approved visa issuances for 31 U.S. officials, while a total of 30 others were being reviewed. He advised that an upcoming visit to assess future sites for a new embassy compound (NEC) should include meetings with relevant provincial and municipal officials. On the ALC, Sabagh said he would forward our request to the Minister and noted that no decision had been taken on whether to permit its reopening. End Summary.

[2. \(C\) Visas:](#) Sabagh reported the MFA had approved some 31 visas since Feltman's March 7 meeting with FM Muallim. A total of 30 more were under review, while the MFA and Syrian Embassy in Washington were unable to find applications for nine others. Sabagh requested an updated list; Charge thanked Sabagh for his and Ambassador Moustafa's assistance and agreed to pass updated information on pending visa applications for Post personnel.

[3. \(C\) Murad Case:](#) Charge shared a dip note with information on the Murad child abduction case, which FM Muallim had requested after Acting A/S Feltman raised the issue in the March 7 meeting. Charge asked whether there was an appropriate MFA consular contact with whom our Consul General might meet to discuss the case. Sabagh replied he was unsure who the appropriate Syrian point of contact would be, since the father was a Lebanese, not a Syrian national, and therefore the issue was not a Syrian consular issue. Sabagh promised to consult the MFA's legal department and get back to the Embassy.

[4. \(C\) NEC Team Visit:](#) Sabagh asked about the purpose of the March 23-27 NEC team visit. Charge explained this was an initial visit to assess different prospective sites for a new embassy compound in and around Damascus. Sabagh advised that different zoning and building regulations applied depending on where the land was located; for example, outside the city

of Damascus, buildings were limited to three stories, whereas a six story limit applied within Damascus city limits. He affirmed that the MFA Protocol Office was the right point of contact for this group suggested that once the team identifies favorable options, the team consult with the MFA to ensure that the appropriate meetings with provincial and municipal officials were arranged. Charge agreed and thanked Sabagh for the MFA's willingness to assist.

15. (C) A/S Boswell Visit: Charge shared Diplomatic Security A/S Eric Boswell's plans to visit Damascus o/a April 20-21 and asked who the appropriate MFA contact would be regarding Embassy security issues. Sabagh asked what Boswell's focus would be; Charge replied Embassy security issues and the new embassy compound. Sabagh said he would check with FM Muallim on this issue and respond to us later.

16. (C) Export Licenses: In response to FM Muallim's request for assistance in facilitating safety-of-flight and medical equipment export licenses allowed under U.S. sanctions law, Charge briefed Sabagh on a dipnote sent to the MFA expressing the Embassy's willingness to meet with the appropriate contacts. Sabagh expressed the MFA's appreciation and said that Vice Minister Miqdad had been tasked to set up a meeting with the Embassy on these issues and would be in contact with us.

17. (C) ALC: Charge briefed Sabagh on the Embassy's dipnote (emailed to ELA) following up on Acting A/S Feltman's request for permission to re-open the ALC in his March 7 meeting with FM Muallim. Sabagh said he had seen the note but was uncertain why the Embassy needed to do so by May 1, as stated in the note. Charge explained that financial and other administrative factors were driving decisions by that date on whether to renew building leases and extend or terminate staff contracts. Charge added that there had been ambiguity about the MFA's order to the Embassy in October 2008 regarding the ALC's status and whether it fell under the rubric of the Cultural Affairs Center. If it made it easier for the SARG, the Embassy could provide the appropriate cover for the ALC and its re-opening could be undertaken without fanfare to avoid drawing attention. Sabagh replied that no decision had been taken and that more time would be needed. He said he would share our message with FM Muallim and get back to us.

18. (C) Comment: This was the Embassy's first formal exchange with the MFA since the Feltman-Shapiro meeting. In general, Sabagh's body language and tone indicated a desire to be responsive. Sabagh shared a few incidentals of his recent trip with FM Muallim to Doha and plans to return there for the Arab League and Arab-Latin Summit at the end of March. Sabagh's offer to facilitate visits and check with the Foreign Minister on a number of issues reflected a new and improved tone, but his uncertainty about whether there would be a SARG decision on the ALC by May 1 suggested the new goodwill may have its limits.  
CONNELLY